

Crain's New York Business

Legal Aid carrying on without the mod cons: Still displaced, lawyers make do with boxes, leaky storage rooms

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In her storage room-turned-office, Jennifer Baum works under an expanding leak that is causing the ceiling to turn brown and crumble. Mold grows in the buckets positioned to catch the water.

She shrugs it off. Outside her office she has taped up a clear plastic suit, and a sign that reads, "All employees must don protective gear before coming in."

Such is life in limbo. Nearly a year after Sept. 11, the Legal Aid Society-the lawyers for New York's poor and homeless-remains, well, homeless.

Contaminated space

The nonprofit has been barred from returning to its 90 Church St. headquarters, across from the World Trade Center site, because of environmental concerns.

Legal Aid has uncomfortable company. More than 11,500 New Yorkers continue to work out of temporary space, according to analysis by Manhattan-based real estate brokerage TenantWise.com Inc. and Crain's New York Business. That's 8% of the 137,000 workers who lost their offices or access to them when the Twin Towers collapsed.

Legal Aid's 450 displaced attorneys and staffers have spent the past 12 months spread among previously unused spaces-some unused for good reason-in the nonprofit's other offices. It could be another year and a half before they return to their old desks.

They have contended with difficult working conditions as demand for Legal Aid's services is on the rise because of Sept. 11 and the deteriorating economy. The civil division is spread among a few boroughs. Their papers and documents, some 20,000 boxes worth, are stuck in a storage facility in Linden, N.J.

"I am counting the days till we can have all the parts back in one place," says Steven Banks, Legal Aid's associate attorney in chief.

In the memories of the exiled workers, the old office has achieved mythical proportions. They say the wood paneling and rugs had the ability to cool emotions and lift spirits.

The Legal Aid office on Montague Street in Brooklyn Heights, where 65 displaced workers have cobbled together space amid the faded and scratched walls, looks more like

a bargain basement. Jammed into small rooms, the staff is still trying to piece together a sense of place.

Ms. Baum replaced the wind-up chattering teeth she lost, and she has established a new emergency drawer of Motrin, pantyhose and tampons. But it took years to collect all of the squishy, bendable toys she used to relieve stress.

Elisabeth Benjamin was able to salvage some things from 90 Church St. But fears of what wafted into her office are causing her to throw out almost all of them. A Rolodex she crossed barricades to retrieve in the days after Sept. 11 is headed for the trash.

"I keep saying, 'That's from 90 Church-wash your hands,' " says Ms. Benjamin, the supervising attorney of the health law practice.

The wanderer

Sam Davol is a nomad. When he moved to Montague Street, the staff attorney shared an office with a colleague. But confidential client meetings or phone calls continually forced one of them to leave the room. Fed up, Mr. Davol agreed to wander, inhabiting the offices of vacationing staffers.

He and his three boxes have moved in and out of three offices in the past month and a half alone. Part caretaker, part squatter, Mr. Davol has developed a green thumb with office plants and has become accustomed to working in front of pictures of other people's loved ones. He has also become a connoisseur of grade-school art.

"Some offices have lots of finger paintings," says Mr. Davol, studying a work of diagonal and vertical red smears on brown construction paper. "I've seen better."